Andreas Musolff, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom

Metaphorical Blending in Conspiracy Theory Discourses: a German Case Study

ABSTRACT

This paper studies the blending of diverse conspiracy theories (CTs) in the context of public debates in Germany about the COVID-19 pandemic, with a special focus on right-wing extremist CTs. They provide a prototypical example of metaphorical projections of fictitious resistance/war scenarios onto a conceptually alien topic (i.e. that of pandemic containment), as predicted by Danesi's (2023) analysis of CTs. Retrospective interviews with CT believers confirm a degree of conceptual "fossilization" (Danesi) but it still remains an open question whether this is the result of neurophysiological processes, as posited by Danesi, or of socio-emotive benefits, such as emotional reassurance in identity building. In either case, mere fact-checking and/or -falsification is insufficient to prevent the CTs' socially detrimental effects. I therefore argue that in addition to cognitive analysis, CTs have to be confronted by counter-narratives that empower the recipients to rely on their own epistemic competencies.

KEYWORDS

blending; cognitive analysis; conspiracy theory; metaphor, scenario

1. Introduction

Metaphors belong to the core group of rhetorical "figures" that have been categorized and analysed in Western philosophical traditions since the days of Aristotle (Aristotle, 1991, 1996; Mahon, 1999). Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, seem to be much newer, with a pedigree going back only to the 1940s and 1960s when the philosopher Karl Popper and the historian Richard Hofstadter discussed them as characteristic, socially and philosophically highly problematic phenomena of 20th century politics (Hofstadter, 1964; Popper, 1962). In their overview over the "History of Conspiracy Theory Research", Michael Butter and Peter Knight (2021) have acknowledged the catalyst function of Popper's and Hofstadter's articles for research on conspiracy theories, or CTs, as they will be abbreviated from here onwards, but have also criticized their "pathologizing" and "marginalizing" bias (Butter & Knight 2021, p. 35). Thalmann (2019) even speaks of a "stigmatization" of CTs since the 1950s. Whilst not engaging in Popper- or

Andreas Musolff, Intercultural Communication School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and Communication Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, musolffandreas@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5635-7517

Hofstadter-exegesis, the article will return to their view of CTs as distorting public communication.

2. Conspiracy Theory Research and Metaphor

In their 2020 survey, Butter and Knight identified three main trends of CT research that have developed following Popper and Hofstadter: first, psychological research that has discussed, criticized and refined the "paranoia" diagnosis, then, political science approaches, and lastly and most recently, cultural and cultural history studies, with a side-line of research debates in analytical philosophy (Butter & Knight, 2021, pp. 36–42). One discipline which Butter and Knight did not highlight in particular was linguistic research, but this gap has been at least partly filled over the last years by publications investigating CTs from discourse-analytical, pragmatic and cognitive-linguistic angles, with the latter also highlighting the salient use of metaphors (Birchall & Knight, 2023; Danesi, 2023; Demata et al., 2022; Deschrijver, 2021; Maci et al., 2024; Musolff, 2023). By far the methodologically most ambitious of these is Danesi's 2023 book, *Politics, Lies and Conspiracy Theories. A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective*, which starts with the claim that CTs are "false narratives based on underlying metaphorical constructs" (p. 8) and devotes most of its argument to substantiating this hypothesis. It is not possible to do full justice to his book here, but as its principal claim concerns our topic directly, an attempt to sketch its main line of argument will be made in this section, in order to test it later on against empirical data and to develop it further.

Following the cognitive model of metaphor as a *mapping* (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980/2003) of two or more concepts across different experiential domains, Danesi locates the conceptual basis of CTs in the "mapping of conspiratorial source domains onto targets of self-serving interest, allowing the conspiracists to provide illusory evidence that they see as corroborative of the central conspiracy" (Danesi 2023, p. 44). He draws on the 'COVID-19-as-a-hoax' CT (Birchall & Knight 2023, pp. 84–88), which was promoted, *inter alia,* by the right-wing CT-movement "QAnon", as an exemplary case:

> [...] conspiracy groups such as QAnon spun a false narrative about political entities working behind the scenes, producing the virus so that [US president] Trump's voter favorability would fall. As a result, those who subscribed to the conspiracy theory reacted by seeing protective masks and vaccines as political symbols, rather than prophylactic devices against the spread and persistence of the virus. (Danesi 2023, p. 41)

Danesi is absolutely right in highlighting both the narrative and figurative characteristics of CTs. In the first place, CTs are not "theories", whether in a logical or in a practical sense, because they primarily tell a story, i.e. that of a conspiracy having caused a catastrophe or its 'clear and present danger'. Insofar

as CTs pretend to include and expose empirical "facts" concerning that catastrophe they may be called "factual narratives" (Musolff, 2020), but that factuality does not turn them into a rational argument. All factual data in CTs are, as Danesi (2023, p. 41) points out, "illusory evidence" for a fallacious pseudo-argument, because they only 'prove' what has already been presupposed. For instance, the pandemic-as-a-hoax CT alleged that COVID-19 masks and vaccines had to be the products of a conspiracy of "Big Pharma" and an anti-Trump cabal. Hence, the medicines were seen by CT-believers not as health-preserving measures but as means of illegitimate profit-making. But this 'argument' was perfectly circular: the speculative suspicion of a conspiracy was used to justify the mistrust in medical research and public healthcare provisions, and this mistrust in turn was viewed as buttressing the assumption of a conspiracy. However, neither of these assumptions was proven in the sense of standard practical or pragma-dialectical argumentation (Toulmin, 1958; van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1998); instead, CT propagators and believers kept up the pretense that the two narrative elements of the CT, i.e. 1) the speculative stories about a conspiracy and 2) those about only 'for profit' but otherwise 'useless' medicines, supported each other as if they were data and conclusion in an argumentation.

One "central metaphor", or rather source domain, of CTs is for Danesi the notion of a *fight* or *war* of a we-group against malevolent agents, which is mapped onto the target domain of a perceived crisis or catastrophe. Thus, the war-story of a liberal "Deep State" cabal in America that manipulates elections, arranges terroristic attacks and organizes child abuse and murder, was projected on the COVID-19 pandemic to construe a fictitious 'explanation' for the latter. Similarly, the notion of a world-wide plot of Jewish leaders to manipulate economies and start wars in order to achieve world domination, as articulated in the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* at the start of the 20th century, was adopted by the Nazis in their Holocaust propaganda, and it has resurfaced in present-day CTs to explain current socio-political crises (Danesi, 2023 15, 28–41; Hagemeister, 2022;). Referring to studies of metaphor understanding that are largely based on Lakoff's (2008) "neural metaphor theory", Danesi (2023, p. 97) claims that "the power of metaphor exists literally in the structure of the brain's circuitry in which metaphor is formed and structured", so that a "complex metaphorical thought [...] is formed via a neural binding mechanism", which leads to further inferencing and ultimately becomes "[...] 'hard-wired,' becoming more and more difficult to undo" (ibid.). Due to this neural hard-wiring, metaphorical CTs can be held unconsciously and become automatically accessed pseudo-knowledge, which people are fully convinced of as being self-evident. To counter the alleged mind-determining power of CTs, Danesi (2023) proposes to go beyond the well-intended but impotent appeals to "linguistic and behavioral integrity" (p. 101) by way of decoding the CT narratives' "underlying political lies" and blocking

their "fossilization in the brain's amygdala, whereby truth and lies are no longer distinguishable" (p. 101).

As stated before, this is not the place to fully review the impressive methodological and analytical achievement of Danesi's book but we can 'take away' from it at least two central hypotheses: 1) CTs involve the figurative, i.e. metaphorical, cross-domain mapping of narratives; 2) the resulting "fossilization of lies" forms an unconscious neural network, which explains their immunity to rational, fact-based deconstruction or falsification.

The following section explores how these insights can be applied and tested in a case study of the blending of several CTs in the context of Germany's public debate about the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The notion of "blending" is understood in the sense of an integration of diverse "mental spaces", as outlined in the works of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (Fauconnier, 1994; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Through selective superimposition, single as well as complex mental spaces generate new "blended" meanings, which may be improbable, counterfactual or completely fictitious in terms of their conceptual inputs. As narratives about supposed conspiracies, CTs are themselves already complex mental inputs, but when blended they appear to confirm each other, which makes them even more dangerous than in isolation.

3. Blended conspiracy Theories

On 29 August 2020, the German capital Berlin witnessed a large protest rally against the government's COVID-19 restrictions, which by that time included social distancing, mask mandates and lockdowns. The demonstrators comprised a multitude of protesters from across the political spectrum, i.e., from so-called "lateral thinkers" (*Querdenker*) and advocates of "alternative" life-styles on the left to far-right extremist groupings (Pantenburg et al., 2021; Reichardt, 2021). During the afternoon, one of the latter groups, about 400 strong, who self-identified on their banners bearing the colours of the 1871–1918 German Empire (black, white and red) and the symbol of its "imperial" eagle as "citizens of the Empire" (*Reichsbürger*), broke through the barriers around the Parliament building and tried to get inside. They were, however, stopped by the police guarding the parliament building (*Die Welt* 2020a, b; *Der Tagesspiegel,* 2020, *Die Zeit,* 2020; Thorwart, 2022). Despite their lack of success in entering the parliament, the *Reichsbürger* made it onto the front pages of the international press (e.g., *The Guardian,* 2020; *The New York Times,* 2020). Until then, the *Reichsbürger* had been perceived mainly as a marginal group who refused to pay taxes and follow administrative rules on the pretense that they did not recognize the legitimacy of the current German state. This pretense, however, had an extremist right-wing ideological background in a special CT which alleged that the German nation had been deliberately refused a Peace Treaty after WW II and

that, as a consequence, the post-war German states (West and East Germany) and their post-1990 unified successor state were illegitimate and had only ever been zones of occupation under the control of foreign elites (Schönberger & Schönberger, 2023).

The 2020 attack on the Parliament, though in practical terms a failure, had a high symbolic value. Events in the following years showed that it was part of a far larger strategy. During 2021–2022, various sub-groups of *Reichsbürger* were arrested and put on trial for, *inter alia,* preparing to kill the Saxon minister president, Michael Kretschmer, and to abduct the federal health minister, Karl Lauterbach, and even for planning an armed putsch against the national government (*Der Spiegel,* 2022, 2023; Thorwart, 2022). They seem to have seen the pandemic as a fitting context in which they could launch their campaign to overthrow the hated federal state and to re-found a German Empire.

But what had this German far-right nationalist, revisionist ideology got to do with pandemic-protests? *Prima facie,* a link between an idolization of the authoritarian 1871–1918 German Empire and the COVID-19 related healthcare protests was counter-intuitive, for the historical German Empire was known for its highly restrictive policies against infectious diseases (Thießen, 2013). It is by no means self-evident that present-day right-wing extremists who are nostalgic about Germany's imperial past should form the avantgarde of a COVID-19-rally. Neither is it clear why an anti-authoritarian protest movement should allow themselves to become fellow travelers of far-right extremists. However, when studying their conspiracist narratives in detail, some convergent trends of (pseudo-)argumentation emerge. On the presupposition that the state's containment measures against the pandemic, such as social distancing, lockdowns, mask mandates and, ultimately, vaccination, were superfluous, it 'made sense' for both sides to suspect the state authorities of pursuing hidden nefarious aims. Non-compliance with the restrictions was likened to an act of "resistance" on a par with anti-Nazi actions during the Third Reich. Some protesters even posed as successors of Jewish Holocaust victims by wearing mock-"Star of David" symbols and denounced the COVID-19 laws as a repeat of the "Enabling Act" (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*) that had legalized the Nazi dictatorship (*Der Spiegel,* 2020). The *Reichsbürger* CT of the German federal government acting on foreign orders to keep the nation enslaved fitted this pseudo-conclusion about a hidden agenda perfectly by conveying an ethically super-legitimate identity as "resistance"-fighters on its followers.

This identity-building function was confirmed by a newspaper dossier published three years later, which reported interviews with 29 of the *Reichsbürger* demonstrators identified as participants in the attempted "storming of the Reichstag" (*Die Zeit*, 2023). Their statements provide some, albeit self-reported, insights into the conspiracy beliefs that motivated these protesters

to engage in their violent actions[1]. The informants articulated two main lines of argument and shared one common emotional experience. The two lines of argumentation for excusing their actions consisted in 1) minimizing their personal actions or involvement in the violence (in view of ongoing judicial investigation and prosecution) and 2) insisting on the legitimacy of resisting the COVID-19 restrictions because they were violations of their human rights and in any case the actions of a post-WW II colonial administration, in contrast to the last 'proper' German state, i.e. the old Empire (1871–1918) founded by Bismarck, when everything was "in order" (ibid.). The latter assumption rests on a larger CT narrative shared by *Reichsbürger* CT believers about a 'lost' golden pre-WW I Empire which Germans were allegedly cheated out of, which is treated as privileged 'counter-knowledge'.

The shared emotional experience of the "storming" event was described as "huge joy" (*riesig gefreut*), solidarity of "us against the rest of the world" (*Wir gegen den Rest der Welt*), and being together with "so many wonderful people" (*so viele tolle Menschen kennengelernt*) (*Die Zeit*, 2023). Some verbal aggression also came through in the interviews, in the form of insults against journalists, e.g. as "prostitutes" of the ruling "system", combined with threats to prosecute or use violence against them or against members of parliament (*Die Zeit*, 2023). All in all, the 2020 rally was assessed retrospectively as an epiphany-like experience, in which long-held suspicions were revealed as true through the manifest repressive actions by an authoritarian state (i.e. the police stopping and arresting them). Blending their own CT narrative of an alleged national enslavement with the conspiracist criticism of COVID-19 restrictions presented the *Reich citizen* groups with a unique chance to view themselves as part of a popular rebellion, which they tried to enact through storming the parliament.

Schematically, adopting the terminology of "Conceptual Integration Theory" (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002), we can express this Blending process as follows[2]:

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[1]   For a further analysis of statements by German anti-COVID protesters, which highlights a similar motivation see Pantenburg et al., 2021.

[2]   The schema as presented here represents an oversimplification, insofar as each of the input spaces is more complex than indicated and also connected with further CT inputs such as the QAnon CTs and also CTs about immigration as a "population replacement" in Germany and Europe. The resulting characterizations of the generic and blended spaces should thus be read as abbreviated paraphrases.

Table 1. Blending schema

Input space 1: COVID-19 CTs (main emphasis on CT-subset: 'COVID-19 as hoax')		Input space 2: Reich citizen CTs (main emphasis on CT-subset: 'FRG as illegitimate state and the Reich citizen's right to fight against it)
Generic space (as the 'sum' of Input spaces 1 and 2): 'COVID-19 is a hoax and the FRG is an illegitimate state; hence, the FRG's (anti-)COVID-19 legislation is both superfluous and illegitimate and need not be obeyed'		
	Blended space: 'If the (illegitimate) state FRG, in the form of its agents of repression (i.e. the police) hinders us Reich citizens from protesting against the COVID-legislation, we are entitled to attack the agents of repression'	

4. Conclusion

The 2020 German Parliament storming attempt and its interpretation as an act of resistance against a dictatorial regime by the perpetrators presents an exemplary case of a (momentary) 'fulfilment' experience of a CT-blend, and it allows us to draw conclusions about the cognitive and emotive functions of CTs. In the first place, Danesi's hypothesis of the metaphorical projection of a war/fight narrative onto a conceptually unrelated social conflict (pandemic management) is confirmed. In fact, we have two such narratives, i.e. that of Germany's fight against its 'national enslavement' and that of 'free-thinking' people standing up against a cabal of 'Big Business/Science' and the 'Deep State', both of which are mapped onto the topical protest against the official pandemic management. As the post-rally interviews cited above were based on self-interpretations and not on neuro-physiological evidence, the evidence of these CTs' "fossilization" in the brain-circuits of their believers, which Danesi claims (2023, p. 101), is of necessity indirect. Nevertheless, the presence of the myths about the illegitimacy of the German federal state and of its measures to contain the pandemic in the *Reichsbürger* self-justifications three years later shows a high degree of ideological entrenchment. Furthermore, the near-euphoric memory of comradeship in the face of the perceived "repression" by the police and of enduring judicial investigation is testimony to the emotional reassurance the protesters derived from their concrete fight-experience. Far from discouraging them from further action, the abortive "storming" of the parliament seems to have confirmed and strengthened their beliefs.

In terms of deconstructing such beliefs, Danesi (2023) is right in demanding a cognitive "decoding" of the metaphorical mappings of the "underlying political lies" (pp. 100–101), rather than mere fact-checking and -falsification. However, it is important to remember that the war/fight narratives underlying the CTs that we have studied are not just "lies" in the sense of simple non-truths but, as narrative-explanatory "source" inputs, are 'more than the sum of their (invented) parts' and thus seem to make sense even if their truth-value is known to be doubtful. As (seemingly coherent) stories, they override the inferential checks that have been identified as crucial ingredients of "epistemic vigilance", such as testing the reliability of the source and the consistency of new information with already established knowledge (Sperber et al., 2010, pp. 369–379). If "the content of the ideas matters less to you than who you share them with, since they may help define group identities" (p. 382), such common-sense vigilance checks may be overruled. That effect seems to have been reached in the euphoric remembrance of the "Reichstag storming" by its participants. Their shared fight experience provided them with an emphatic group identity (or its reinforcement). In addition to the potential brain-physiological "fossilization" of CTs, it is their socio-emotive benefit that makes it attractive to hold on to them. In this way, CTs give reassurance to recipients who may have experienced cognitive dissonance and social insecurity, e.g. feelings of losing control over their own bodies and/or social identities through a pandemic.

This finding brings us back to Popper's (1962) and Hofstadter's (1964) diagnoses of CTs as irrational or "paranoid" cognitive constructions. As mentioned earlier, their CT-critical views may be criticized as "pathologizing" and biased, as well as leaving open the question of how to distinguish them from truthful or factually correct theories about real conspiracies (Butter & Knight 2021, p. 35; see also Pigden, 2018). However, this latter question is partly due to a confusion about terminological issues that can be solved by defining epistemological criteria for "warranted" and "unwarranted" CTs (Keeley, 2018). It is, after all, not so much the "theory" aspect but the detrimental social effects of CTs that deserve opprobrium and criticism, as they confound people's rational epistemic vigilance mechanisms and give them an illusionary emotional reassurance. These politically potentially catastrophic effects of CTs call for strategies to decode and neutralize them both cognitively and emotionally. Only an approach that addresses and challenges both the epistemic *and* the emotive appeal of CTs can enable their recipients to reflect critically on why they feel a need for the pseudo-reassurance of having to fight (in aa literal, violent sense) against a perceived national or even global conspiracy. Ultimately, countering CTs has to go beyond decoding the metaphors and lies of CTs by providing holistic counter-narratives that enable people to regain trust in their own epistemic and social competencies.

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